Political Evil

WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO COMBAT IT

ALAN WOLFE

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Political Evil

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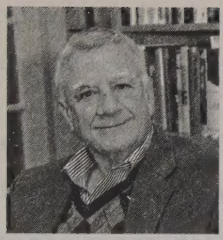

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Alan Wolfe

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Must we not warn victorious nations that they are wrong in regarding their victory as a proof of their virtue, lest they engulf the world in a new chain of evil by their vindictiveness, which is nothing else than the fury of their self-righteousness?

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1948)

There seems to be a curious American tendency to search, at all times, for a single external center of evil to which all our troubles can be attributed, rather than to recognize that there might be multiple sources of resistance to our purposes and undertakings, and that these sources might be relatively independent of each other.

—George F. Kennan (1985)

A maxim for the twenty-first century might well be to start not by fighting evil in the name of good, but by attacking the certainties of people who claim always to know where good and evil are to be found.

—Tzvetan Todorov (2000)

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Political Evil

INTRODUCTION

The Fundamental Question of the Twenty-first Century

PUTTING POLITICS FIRST

When the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in 1945 that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe," she could easily have broadened her geographic scope. There is no more important problem facing the entire world today than the existence of evil, and there is no subject more characterized by muddled thinking and self-defeating responses. Evil threatens us in ways that make hurricanes, global warming, flu pandemics, and financial panics, as awful as they are, seem small by comparison. Present all around us, evil demands our best efforts to understand it if it is to be contained. In this book I offer a way of thinking designed to do that.

The problem of evil is one of our oldest intellectual conundrums. Volumes have been written attempting to define evil, to catalog its horrors, to account for its persistence, to explain its appeal, to confront its consequences. The subject has attracted philosophers, poets, artists, theologians, psychologists, novelists, composers, and physicians. Every major language has a term for evil, and every major religion—pantheistic, dualistic, or monotheistic—shows a preoccupation with it. Human beings may want to be good, but they have long recognized that they have to familiarize themselves with the bad. Because it touches so closely the mystery of human existence, evil is a subject best approached with considerable trepidation. Fortunately, this has not stopped some of the finest thinkers the world has ever known from addressing it.

The moment we begin to ask questions about the nature of evil, however, we begin to understand how difficult it will be to answer them. In the West alone, two of the greatest theologians in the Christian tradition—Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—spent countless pages exploring whether evil exists and what forms it takes, work that in many ways was shaped by earlier, pre-Christian philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Every student asked to read *Macbeth* or *Othello* is

introduced to the complexity of evil, as are those who ponder *Paradise Lost* or Goethe's *Faust.* A fascination with the problem of evil, argues the philosopher Susan Neiman, dominated the writings of such Enlightenment thinkers as Rousseau, Kant, and Voltaire and found particularly poignant expression in the post-Enlightenment philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Similar concerns shaped America's writers and leaders, appearing in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, the debates over the Constitution, the work of Herman Melville, and the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. Dostoyevsky and Conrad were only two of the great European novelists who wrote about evil in strikingly contemporary ways. As late as the 1950s, explorations of evil lay at the heart of such widely regarded scholars as Arendt, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and those Jewish philosophers such as Emil Fackenheim moved by the Holocaust to reflect on just what future God had in mind for his chosen people. We know evil is there, yet we are not sure what makes people evil or whether their evil can ever be overcome.

One way to start the discussion is to narrow the focus. Evil is all too often analyzed at too high a level of abstraction. If theologians tell us that evil is what human beings do in the absence of God, they face the difficult tasks of defining God's essence, interpreting his words, and deciding which of many available deities is the authoritative one. Philosophers who conceptualize evil as a disturbance in the natural order of the universe must wrestle with the nature of the universe, not to mention the meaning of order. Contemporary neuroscientists who view evil as a product of faulty hard-wiring in our brains do not always know what is taking place in our minds. There are times and places when discussions of the theology or the metaphysics of evil are appropriate. But there are also times when they can get in the way of knowing what to do when we are confronted with terrorists who fly planes into buildings or enforcers of ethnic solidarity who rape and kill those whose land they covet.

The most important thing we need to do to come to terms with the horrors confronting us is to stop talking about evil in general and focus instead on political evil in particular. *Political evil refers to the willful, malevolent, and gratuitous death, destruction, and suffering inflicted upon innocent people by the leaders of movements and states in their strategic efforts to achieve realizable objectives.* Later on I will revisit this definition with more care; distinguish between political, everyday, and

radical evil; examine the specific forms that political evil can take; and discuss the best ways to respond to each of them. But for now I want to insist that while political evil causes massive amounts of harm and directly assaults our fundamental moral sense, we need not feel hopeless in the face of it. We are unlikely ever to wipe evil per se off the face of the earth. But if we think more clearly and act more strategically, we can significantly reduce the amount of *political* evil threatening us.

Bringing the problem of evil down from the heavens into the world of politics and policy offers advantages that can help make the atrocities we face in the world today more intelligible. One is that it changes the kinds of questions we ask. Politics is not philosophy, and neither is it theology or neuroscience. Those who plan and carry out political evil no doubt have malevolence in their hearts or malfunctions in their brains. But it is not their insides that ought to concern us; it is their acts. Whether they are twisted by hatred and envy, exemplars of a depraved human nature, stunted in their development because they were abused as children, psychotic or sociopathic, unwilling to allow a savior into their lives, suffering from delusions of grandeur, obsessive-compulsive in their personality disorders, the product of a poor genetic heritage, or seriously dependent on their meds to get through the day is a matter of scant interest to us. Let them talk to their therapists, make pacts with Mephistopheles, send out videotapes explaining their acts, or seek redemption for the horrors they unleash; we have little at stake in their struggles with their demons. We can recognize their depravity, but it is their cunning that ought to concern us. We need not reform them, stigmatize them, or show them the path to salvation. We need to stop them, and in order to do that we have to focus on the political causes that attract them and their followers. Acts are easier to change than people.

A focus on political evil, in addition, reminds us of how evil and politics make for an especially toxic mix. Organized into a movement or state and motivated by a cause that gives them passion and purpose, practitioners of political evil are capable of carrying out violence on levels that far surpass those realizable by any lone individual. Evil individuals without a state or movement behind them can shed only so much blood. Those who gain command over the state's sources of revenue and monopoly of violence are capable of making that blood flow in amounts too copious to measure. One reason political evil is so

omnipresent is that states are so common. Even dictators ruling over poor or not very strategically important states—Pol Pot's Cambodia, Omar al-Bashir's Sudan—can cause unimaginable suffering. Because of the growth of modern states, political evil has in a sense been democratized—and in the most frightening of ways. As the potency of means of destruction has increased, so has the number of leaders with access to them.

Paradoxically, however, the same control over a movement or a state that maximizes the power at the disposal of these leaders also tempers their extremism. For better or worse, those who commit acts of political evil have been tested; they have risen through the ranks of an organization to assume a position of control within it. Almost never elected to office, and inclined to suspend elections even when they have been, they can be as ruthless toward their followers as they are toward their enemies. Yet while they are radical in their choice of means, politically evil leaders are often conservative in how they apply them. Having spent years building a movement or assuming a position of power, they are reluctant to become too reckless for fear of destroying what they have patiently constructed. Evil leaders kill others, and they even, in the form of suicide terrorism, encourage some of their followers to kill themselves. But as *political* leaders, they are anything but suicidal. They serve a cause, and the furtherance of that cause, as well as the organization embodying it, trump everything else. Organizational weapons are therefore inevitably used cautiously. Al-Qaeda spent five years planning its bombings against U.S. embassies in Africa, two developing its attack on the USS *Cole,* and as many as seven preparing for September 11. While it is quite possible that the successful effort by the Obama administration to kill Osama bin Laden in 2011 has crippled al-Qaeda's capacity, any further attacks the group or its offshoots may be planning, based on its earlier record, will not be precipitately chosen. One does not become engaged in politics unless one's cause has a future. Once a group's vision becomes future oriented, its conduct in the present becomes constrained. If the politics in political evil makes us shudder, it also gives us hope.

When confronted with political evil, we are better off responding to the "political" rather than to the "evil." Politics does not ask that we eradicate evil from the dark hearts of men and women. It does demand that when faced with tactics that threaten our way of life in the pursuit

of political goals, we at least make an effort to understand why those goals were chosen in the first place. Fighting evil with evil contaminates, but fighting politics with politics does not. We confuse the two at great risk to ourselves. There will be situations when we will be tempted to conclude that the methods used against us are so evil that there is nothing to discuss with those who employ them. But precisely because those methods are so evil, we might also decide that we ought to do everything in our power to bring them to an end, even if doing so means engaging politically with people we rightly despise. Political evil gives us choices. We are foolish, and not nearly as moral as we may congratulate ourselves for being, if we refuse to make them.

Because my focus is on political evil and not evil in general, this book, despite its subject matter, will not be a pessimistic one. It is true that we live in an era when the means of political evil are available to so many. But it does not follow that we must accustom ourselves to the status of potential victims who might at any moment be subject to the worst horrors in history. The fact that some employ terror does not mean that everyone should be terrorized. For every practitioner of genocide, there exist activists, lawyers, judges, and humanitarians with real-world experience in bringing genocide to an end. Even the most hate-spewing heads of state with access to weapons of mass destruction do not necessarily want to risk destroying their own people by actually using them. We are only aware of the ubiquity of political evil because we have learned that there are other and better ways for states to manage their affairs than by oppressing their own people or seeking to swallow up their neighbors. We should never doubt the ugliness of political evil. But nor should we doubt our intelligence, both the kind that enables us to think clearly about what we face as well as the kind that helps governments adopt the best national security strategies for responding to the attacks against them.

Political evil, in short, while a problem of utmost seriousness, is not a bottomless quandary. When a new example of political evil breaks out in the world, the last thing we should do is throw up our hands in theological, philosophical, or literary despair. Helplessness only furthers hate. The problem of political evil should concentrate our minds rather than cloud our judgment. Politics always takes place in this world, and it is in this world that we are obligated to remain if we are to combat political evil with any success. It is certainly important to turn to

the great classic texts of the Western tradition to understand human malevolence at its worst. But we also need to think politically about the choices confronting us if we are to bring into being a world with just a little less evil than the one we see around us. Doing so will not produce a perfect world, but it would be a notable achievement nonetheless.

A THOROUGHLY HUMAN PRODUCT

THE UBIQUITY OF political evil cannot be doubted. We all know by now how gargantuan were the mortality levels associated with the most evil regimes of the twentieth century. As the very last survivors of the Nazi *lager*s and Stalinist gulags pass away, and as the definitive histories of that era and those regimes are written, the enormity of what took place still shocks. Of course we have the testimonies of such writers as Elie Wiesel, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Primo Levi, all of whom experienced the full brunt of those horrors and managed to tell their tales. But this only means that when political evil strikes again today—whether in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, or once again in Europe—the killing may not be as bad but the stain on our conscience is worse. It is one thing for carmakers to copy last year's models. It is another for malevolent leaders to replicate yesterday's horrors.

Death is not the only way in which political evil manifests itself. Political evil exists when terrorists spread fear among those who survive their attacks; troops motivated by ethnic hatred order the forced removal of people from their homes or even their country; torture is used to coerce information or induce confession; leaders of autocratic regimes hire thugs to intimidate potential opponents; women are raped and children taken from their parents; camps are built to confine the innocent; and organized crime rings silence those who oppose or investigate them. Not a day goes by without the mass media spreading stories of cruelties that would be unimaginable were they not so widespread.

The immediate victims of political evil are those singled out for direct attack: women stoned to death for their presumed adultery; villagers living in the path of wild-eyed militia organized to kill them because they belong to the wrong tribe; young men systematically executed and buried in mass graves before they reach the age when they can defend their homeland from attack; demonstrators protesting in the streets

killed for merely asserting their rights; families out for a visit to the seashore who come under terrorist lines of fire; innocent bystanders caught up in a zealous search for potential suspects who are then forced to undergo torture or extradition. Portraits of the political evil around us today have so far failed to achieve the status of the literary classics that emerged from the Holocaust and the gulag. But this time we have cell phones and Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media to bring the plight of those directly under the gun to the attention of the world. The pleas of political evil's victims reach us all. Although we cannot imagine the pain they suffer, we cannot fail to be cognizant that they are suffering pain.

At the same time, political evil targets everyone, not just those chosen for immediate harm. I mean this in the most literal sense possible: nuclear weapons are currently possessed by states either unable to contain sectarian furies within or engaged in holy wars without. As chilling as the confrontations of the cold war were, the leaders of both the United States and the Soviet Union managed to avoid dropping their nuclear arsenals on each other. The era of mutually assured destruction, in retrospect, appears surprisingly stable. Regimes with the power to kill in the millions had leaders who, for whatever reason, opted not to use that power.

No such confidence is warranted today. Pakistan, one of the most unstable political systems in the world, not only possesses nuclear weapons but has allowed its Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence to maintain links with the Taliban, all to protect itself against its rival India, a state with nuclear weapons of its own. The potential link between political evil and nuclear weapons, moreover, is hardly confined to South Asia. In the summer of 2009, Iran, a country well on its way to acquiring nuclear capacity, reelected a Holocaust-denying president committed to the destruction of Israel and did so in a blatantly illegal manner requiring the suppression of dissenting voices in its own streets and universities. Moving to another part of the globe, the impenetrable North Korean regime, totally indifferent to the threat of sanctions from the United Nations, engages in nuclear testing as if to remind the world that it just might, whenever it chooses to do so, seek the dominance over the Korea Peninsula it failed to win half a century ago by more conventional means. It took years for the death camps of

the twentieth century to be constructed in ways that enabled them to carry out their mission. Evil regimes in possession of nuclear weapons could achieve vast levels of death and destruction in an instant.

Political evil harms us figuratively as well. When ice caps melt at the poles or when drought causes massive starvation in the world's poorest regions, we féel that we should have taken steps to avoid the resulting catastrophes, but the causal links are complicated and still being explored, and the promised results far off. To be sure, there are things we can do, such as buying hybrid cars, turning down thermostats, and volunteering to do good deeds abroad, and these will no doubt help modify the severity of the harms. But we also recognize that while we have some control over nature, nature has a way of making up its own mind. When it does, our responsibility ends. This is not to deny the scope of realities such as climate change, drought, AIDS, malnutrition, and inadequate sanitation, all of which are among the most serious problems the world needs to solve and require massive human intervention to rectify. They are, however, best addressed by calling upon the powers of invention and technology rather than by raising the fundamental questions that have puzzled theologians and moral philosophers over the centuries.

The question of political evil is entirely different. A thoroughly human product, political evil shatters every practice and institution we put in place to protect all of us against the ugliest things of which some of us are capable. When political evil appears in the world, we know, even if we do not always acknowledge the fact, that something has gone fundamentally awry in the human situation. We might have persuaded ourselves that peace is possible in our time, but when ethnic groups seek to wipe each other out, the conviction that people can find ways of peaceably resolving their differences is put to the severest test. Gratified by the ability of adherents of different religions in the West to find ways to live together, we are forced to rethink everything we once thought we knew about God and his ways when we see terror carried out in his name. We want life to be as normal as possible, but when other states deny our own state's right to exist, and then take actions to destroy it, we have little choice but to accept the inevitability of abnormality. A hurricane devastates a city, and people rush to help. Terrorists carry out their dirty work, and we are, at least at first, paralyzed. It is much easier to understand nature than to forgive our fellow human beings.

Political evil attacks the body while killing the soul. Brutality destroys faith in humanity just as bloodlust undermines belief in reason. The mere existence of political evil means that we are not living up to the promise we hold out for ourselves. Political evil wreaks its havoc on its immediate victims by taking their lives or destroying their dignity. But it targets its more remote victims—that is, the rest of us—by threatening our sense that there exist agreed-upon moral principles that can be taken for granted across national and cultural boundaries. Political evil is never on automatic pilot. No matter what form it takes, the question of who is responsible for it can never be left unaddressed. The existence of political evil forces us to think about who we are and what our legacy to future generations will be.

As crucial as it is to deal more effectively with political evil, however, we all too often do it in ways that are confused if not contradictory. Overwhelmed by the horrors once associated with totalitarianism, we apply too many inappropriate comparisons with the Nazi and Stalinist period to the events of our own day. We either exaggerate the human capacity for evil by finding it lurking in everyone or make it more difficult to control evil by ascribing to evildoers an almost supernatural ability to get their way in the world. We try to solve political problems by relying on humanitarian instincts—and vice versa. We find ourselves calling for the impossible goal of ending evil instead of the achievable one of containing it. We seek solace or explanation by turning to a God who, if he does exist and is all-powerful, must have willed the evil to occur in the first place. We blame a malevolent human nature when there are just as many people trying to stop evil from taking place as there are allowing it to continue. We convince ourselves that evil is contagious—indeed, in its own way attractive—and that once it manifests itself in one place, it will inevitably spread elsewhere; yet far from being universal, evil nearly always shows its face in local situations. Most important of all, we are never quite sure whether we have truly won a campaign against political evil or have been defeated in our efforts, preparing the way for even more evil in the future.

Finding better ways of responding to political evil, in short, is more than a matter of improving airport security procedures or recruiting better informants; it also requires training in political philosophy and experience with political wisdom. It is this lack of serious reflection about the nature of political evil that explains why Western governments, far

from bringing it under control, all too often enable it to spread. This is certainly the case when, determined to take the hardest possible line against evildoers, they engage in evil acts themselves, whether by relying on torture, suspending basic legal procedures, or turning a blind eye as others torture for them. But they are just as clumsy when they declare wars against terrorism as a way of containing terrorists or refuse to negotiate with leaders who in reality thrive the more they are isolated. Blinded by the rage that evil induces, leaders all too often respond with either inaction or overreaction. Some countries manage to develop better political approaches to political evil than others. But none of them have found the right combination of moral indignation and practical wisdom. And the two countries most threatened by political evil in the modern world—the United States and Israel—have been especially woeful at understanding its political causes and have therefore been unable to successfully combat it. Political evildoers are not so diabolical that they can anticipate just how self-defeating the responses will be to their acts. They have learned that with few exceptions the consternation and hysteria they unleash expand their opportunities to engage in political evil once again.

If we do not find a way to think more clearly about political evil, and if we continue to respond to it so ineffectively, the world we will inhabit will look very different from the one to which we are accustomed. It is not just that we will face new campaigns of extermination and religiously inspired violence; those things have long been part of the human condition. Political evil is no great problem when people expect nothing less. When almost no one is free, slavery seems less criminal. When it is simply assumed as a matter of course that leaders will oppress their own people, the existence of tyranny does not shatter human confidence. When all states are aggressor states, none of them are worse than others. It is only when we have gotten a glimpse of what it means to hope for a better world that political evil in this world shocks us.

A recognition of political evil serves as a reminder that we need not be ruled by it. Most people try to honor the moral codes of their religion, live in peace with their neighbors, learn to respect and tolerate those with whom they disagree, and refrain from urging their leaders to impose vengeance on their enemies. This makes the fact that others do not, that they instead break free of all moral restraint and participate

actively in the cruelest actions known to man, all the more startling and all the more unacceptable. At stake in the question of political evil is not just whether we can bring an end to the death and destruction it inflicts, however important it is to try. Also hanging in the balance is the question of whether we are purposeful beings capable of creating a more just and humane world or are instead subhuman creatures engaged in an endless struggle for survival in which all the advantages go to the most ruthless. If that does not make political evil the fundamental question of the twenty-first century, nothing does.

WARMHEARTED BUT CLEAR-EYED

Two somewhat contrarian approaches follow from focusing on political evil in particular rather than evil in general—and they are best acknowledged up front. The first calls attention to the dangers of misplaced empathy. Evil, the basest of all human motivations, strikes powerful chords deep inside those moved by a sense of compassion. Learning of genocide in distant lands or witnessing what innocent victims of terror have suffered, people with strong humanitarian instincts will identify with those victims and, in the case of those inclined to be politically active, seek to mobilize campaigns on their behalf. When people are dying, activists such as these find it unseemly to parse definitions, to quibble over categories, or to argue over appropriate historical analogies. Intellectuals splitting hairs seem wildly inappropriate when killers are cracking heads. We have seen evil triumph before, their sense of empathy tells them, and we must be vigilant never to allow its victory again. Our hearts must be touched before our brains kick into thought.

Such instinctive empathy, alas, despite its humanitarian wellspring, is not enough when dealing with actual cases of political evil. Political evil is distinctive; it comes in many different forms. Combating political evil demands what responding compassionately to evil in general discourages: making comparisons, thinking critically, questioning assumptions. We need to be careful before we can be effective, taking each case of political evil on its own terms to avoid lumping them all together as if the lessons learned from one automatically apply to the others. Because both Rwanda and Darfur are in Africa and have witnessed horrendous violence, we are inclined to see what happened in the latter as a replay of what took place in the former; yet the situation in Rwanda

proved to be an example of genocide, while the conflict in Darfur grew out of an effort to put down an insurgency, and the difference matters. It may not appear particularly sensitive to those Israelis victimized by the terror unleashed by Hamas and Hezbollah to point out that each has its own reason for existence, or even to raise the question of whether the actions of Israel's leaders in the past and present have contributed to the terror facing its citizens, but these are questions that must be asked if Israel is ever to live without terror. The same risk of seeming indifferent is run if we conclude that the campaigns launched by Serbs against the other ethnic groups with whom they shared the Yugoslav federation were matched in ugly intent by the victims of Serbian aggression with whom we are more likely to identify, but in truth no side in the former Yugoslavia was innocent of the charge of political evil. Who cares if genocide and ethnic cleansing are not the same thing? Why does it matter that the moral and strategic issues raised by suicide terrorism are very different from those presented by terrorism from which the perpetrators walk away unscathed? If someone is shooting at you, is it really important whether he is an alienated high school student oblivious to the larger world around him or a religious believer motivated by a commandment from God? Asking questions in the wake of satanic acts seems, even to the nonreligious, somehow blasphemous.

Still, asking questions and making distinctions are things we must do if we are to understand and combat political evil. Even if it may appear—and I certainly hope it does not—pedantic and unfeeling to clarify concepts and make comparisons in the aftermath of horrors, we have to know what we are up against at any time but especially when we are dealing with actions that shock the moral conscience. We do not serve compassion by offering empathy while withdrawing constructive analysis with an eye to the future. The best way to help political evil's victims is to grasp why they are being victimized. We should not lose our heads just because people lose their lives.

Second, when we talk about evil in general, we frequently make the mistake of treating it as larger than life, as if those who kill en masse, precisely because they commit the worst of human acts, must be motivated by a cause equal to the enormity of their deeds. The twentieth century was an ideological one, and it is therefore no surprise that in its aftermath there exists a widespread inclination, depending upon the political views of the observer, to invoke such large-scale movements

as fascism, communism, colonialism, radical Islam, Zionism, or global terror as explanations for the persistence of political evil. Treating evil as part of some larger worldview seemingly prepares us for the long, hard struggle against it. Those who stoop so low as to rain terror upon the innocent or to kill out of racial, religious, or ethnic hatred, it is widely believed, must be so blinded by a fanatic commitment to a cause that attributing their acts to specific conditions borders on justifying what they do. The end of the cold war, this way of thinking holds, has not brought about the end of grandiose dreams. If anything, we witness frequent clashes of civilizations in which violence deployed on behalf of one way of life leads to fatal collisions with others.

This tendency to find larger reasons for political evil is also a temptation best avoided. Evil in general may be free-floating, but political evil occurs on the ground—often on the most specific and contested pieces of ground—and to understand and combat it requires paying attention to local causes and concerns. The tyrant Saddam Hussein may have had fascist leanings, but he was an Iraqi Ba'athist, not a Nazi. Communism was one of the great failed gods of our time, but it did not cause ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia; the determination of the leaders of noncommunist independent nations to redraw their boundaries to include more people like themselves did. Tribal conflicts escalating throughout Africa have been exacerbated by the artificial divisions Westerners imposed on their former colonies, but those conflicts also have indigenous roots. Hezbollah and Hamas refuse to renounce terror, but their militancy has little to do with something called radical Islam and everything to do with the immediate politics of the Middle East, just as Israel's determination to strengthen its security is motivated by considerations of state-building and is not part of some Zionist effort to control the world. The contemporary era contains more than its share of clashes, but not all of them are civilizational. We must meet political evil where it matters most, and that is where it makes its home. Ideologies do not kill people; local political leaders do.

None of this should lead to the conclusion that the struggle against political evil ought to be stripped of its moral passion. I, for one, find myself in awe of those humanitarians who have made the protection and advancement of fundamental human rights the major cause of their lives. The dedication shown by relief workers who give up the conveniences of Western life to bury the dead and save the wounded is

well beyond my far more modest capacities. I can easily identify with all those who were appalled by the crimes Saddam Hussein had committed against his own people. Once the reality of political evil grips you, it does not let go. You hear about what innocent people experience in any of these hot spots, and you want to do everything in your power to punish those responsible so that other malevolent leaders will be stopped from carrying out similar atrocities.

Still, I believe that something has gone wrong in the way we understand and combat the political evils of our time. I am among those Americans who came to political maturity at the same time that my country decided to wage a war in Vietnam for no good reason and in a way that took countless lives. Like so many others of my generation, I developed such a strong reaction against the misuse of U.S. troops abroad that I could not imagine any circumstance that would justify American intervention into the affairs of other people. This, I later came to learn, was a serious mistake: it did not follow that because American forces were used badly in Vietnam, they should never be used at all. Ultimately appalled at the naïve leftism I saw around me, I resigned from the editorial board of *The Nation*, a magazine that in my view was publishing all too many simplistic attacks on America's role in the world, and began to write for its rival publication, *The New Republic*, known for its harder-line foreign policy positions and willingness to defend the use of American power to promote freedom and democracy. A critic of what we in the New Left had once called "cold war liberalism," I had become something of a post–cold war liberal myself. It especially pleased me that the magazine with which I was identified published intellectuals who wrote about our responsibility never again to allow the evils associated with totalitarianism to go uncontested. They struck me as among the most morally serious thinkers of our time.

I wrote this book because I have begun to have second thoughts—call them third thoughts if you are persuaded that I cannot make up my mind—about the wisdom of rushing to judgment about political evil and assuming that reliance on military power is the best way to combat it. It is not as if I find once again attractive the isolationism born of the fear of American power that took on such prominence in the years after Vietnam. Nor can I ever imagine that I will become an unfeeling realist who believes morality has no role to play in foreign policy decisions. The mass horrors revealed by genocide, ethnic cleansing, and terrorism

prompted me to turn my attention away from the humdrum of domestic elections and policy to questions of moral philosophy and political theology. I still prefer the ideas of those intellectuals who view themselves as heirs to the liberal anticommunism of the earlier days of the cold war to those who blame America first for whatever global problem comes to their attention.

Yet it has become clear to me in recent years that there is often a thin line between moral seriousness and moral posturing. Those on my side of the political fence who twisted themselves into supporting the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq should have thought longer and harder about the immoral implications of preventive war. When I hear talk of a new Islamic conspiracy meant to take over the world, one bearing striking similarity to the Nazi threat of the mid-twentieth century, I shudder at the wildly inappropriate comparison between faith and fanaticism. Political philosophers I deeply admire who write about unjust wars, yet also seem to find wars undertaken by countries with which they identify invariably defensible, strike me as having lost their analytic edge. A decision to invade another country in order to free its citizens from the oppressions visited upon them by their own leaders will surely be required from time to time. But when every case of overseas violence is treated as an example of genocide demanding the deployment of more U.S. troops, something has gone seriously wrong with both the analysis and the recommendation. Newfound cold war liberals appealed to me because of their willingness to courageously confront complacency and cliché. Now I find many of them—their names will become apparent as my argument proceeds—formulaic and conventional. Like them, I continue to believe that we in the West have an overwhelming moral obligation to come to the defense of those victimized by evil irrespective of where they live. The important question is not whether we should but how we can be effective. There is no purpose served by posturing. Experience counts for nothing unless we learn from it.

Although we must continue to make the problem of political evil central to our concerns, we must also be willing to deal with its complexity. It does not benefit the victims of political evil anywhere if, anxious to come to their assistance, we fail to understand precisely what led to their suffering and therefore try to help them in wrong, if not counterproductive, ways. In nearly all the cases of political evil we witness in the contemporary world, the good guys are not always good,

the motives of the bad guys may not be what we (or they) claim, and the failure to understand the motives of both may lead to decisions that wind up increasing suffering. It is for all these reasons that being warmhearted can only be accomplished by being clear-eyed. The risk of treating political evil with dispassion is that one appears not to be taking evil seriously. But making evil central to everything we do allows political evil space to grow. Paradoxes and complexities do not disappear just because our intentions are good. We should be liberal and idealistic enough to identify political evil and do everything in our power to limit its reach. We should also be conservative and realistic enough to recognize that doing so will never be simple and can easily backfire.

Although I will be critical in this book of some of the more hyperventilating campaigns against genocide, and even though I will also distance myself from apocalyptic thinking denouncing terrorism, I hope my readers understand that I respect everyone who makes fighting political evil a priority. If I did not feel as powerfully as they do that we must respond when political evil raises its head, I would not have undertaken the task of attempting to show why I believe they are trying to do the right thing in the wrong way. Some ways of thinking about political evil are more helpful than others. Some ways of combating political evil work better than others. If we are to do our best to limit the consequences of political evil, we cannot rely on sloppy historical analogies, amateurish psychological speculations, discredited theological apologetics, political oversimplifications, rigid ideological categorizations, and tired moral platitudes. We owe the victims of political evil more than our compassion. By lowering our sights we can raise their hopes.